

Ten-gallon challenge

For Rick Smith (LA'92) getting the job young, then getting it done are trademarks of his fast-track success in football. Named the general manager of the Houston Texans last June, Smith, just 36, is the youngest general manager in the National Football League (NFL). A dozen years ago, as secondary coach for Purdue, Smith, then 24, was the youngest position coach in the Big Ten.

What contributed to his early success? "It's a combination of having a vision and an idea of what you want to do and some confidence," says Smith, who is the fourth African-American to head an NFL personnel department, "and being around the right people at the right time."

A native Virginian recruited to Purdue after his high school days in Dayton, Ohio, Smith figured he would parlay a football scholarship into a college teaching career. In a bleak period for Purdue football, Smith once blocked a pair of Northwestern punts on Veteran's Day 1989, retrieving the first and returning it for a touchdown in a 46-15 victory. "I was one of the young leaders on the special

team unit," Smith recalls, "and we had developed a knack for blocking punts. The touchdown was a significant play because it led to a rout."

Smith was a team captain in his senior year – Jim Colletto's first – and though he missed the last three games of the season with an injury, he maintained his leadership role. "The coaching staff approached me about being a graduate assistant," he says.

The assistant position led to the coaching opportunity, and soon the NFL called. Smith joined the Denver Broncos in 1996 and spent a decade as both coach and in the front office. He earned two Super Bowl rings (1998 and 1999) as a defensive backs coach before excelling as talent evaluator.

What makes for an NFL prospect? "I'm looking for talented, smart, physical players with high character who are competitive and passionate about the game of football," Smith says. "That's what I tell my scouts. If you bring me a guy like that, we can win with him."

From Denver's perennial post-season runs to the tall order of building the NFL's newest franchise,

Smith embraces the challenge. "We've got a long way to go," says Smith. "The two key ingredients in this league are ownership and the people you work with. We've got a great owner (Bob McNair) committed to winning, so it's just a matter of adding the right pieces and keeping everyone moving in the direction of winning a world championship."

Smith believes college football could learn from the NFL in promoting African-Americans to leadership positions. "I thought we did a good job overall addressing that issue as a league," Smith says. "It's not a situation where we're saying there ought to be a certain number, but there should be an opportunity."

One opportunity lost to Smith because of his schedule is the chance to visit old friends at Homecoming. But he's saving that for retirement. "I want to run this NFL thing for about 30 years," says Smith. "After that I'll get a chance to enjoy some more fall afternoons at Purdue." And he'll still be a few years shy of 60. —William Meiners

